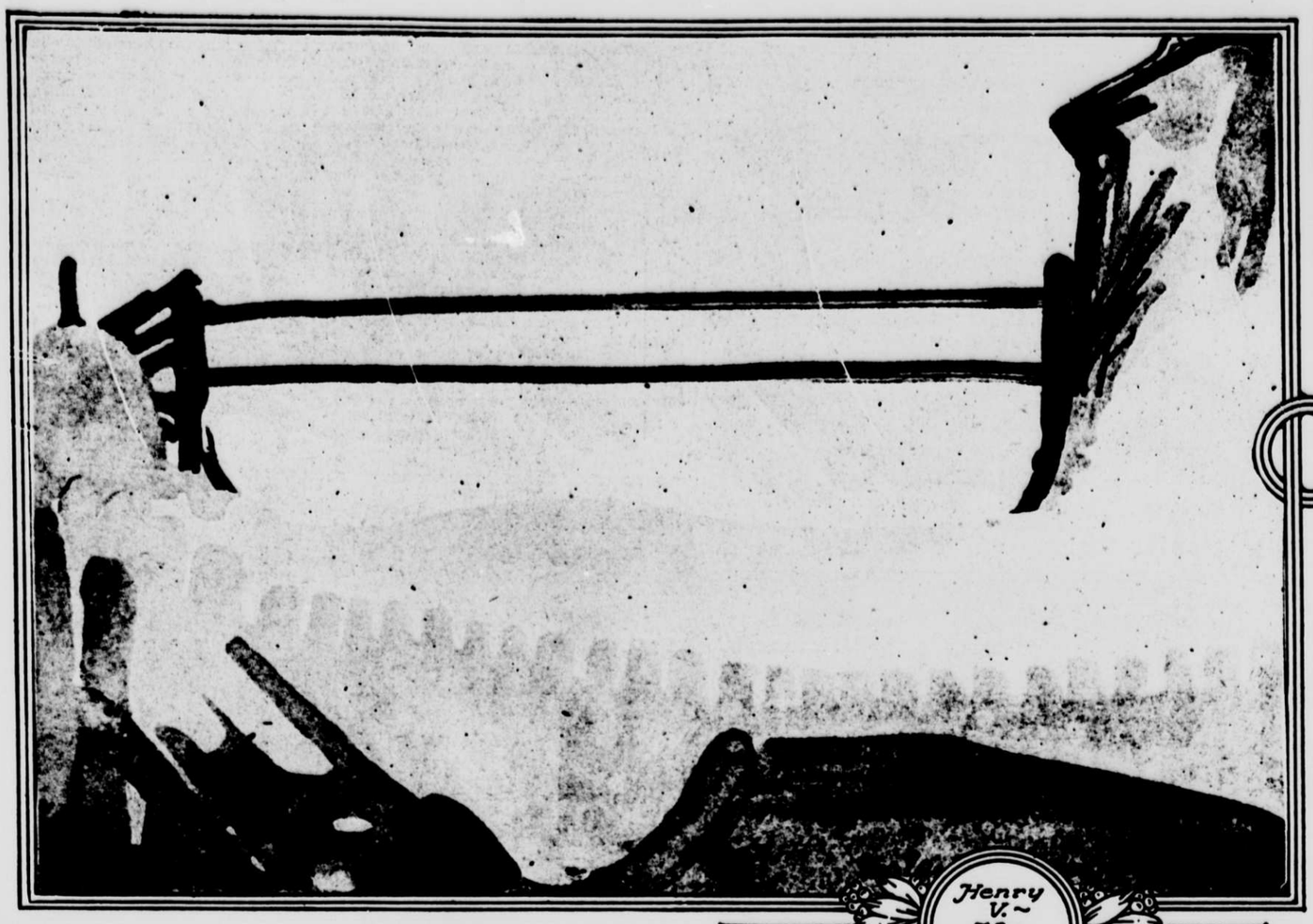
EDWARD GORDON CRAIG APPLIES FUTURIST IDEAS TO THEATRE



Henry V.~ The Tents.

The Masque of London~Wapping Old Stairs.

His Schemes for Radical Changes in Stage Art Has Been Stirring Up Theatrical Centres in Europe—Some Extraordinary Scenery He Has Painted

FOR several years Edward Gordon Craig has been stirring up the theatrical and art centres of Europe with his schemes for a radical change in stage setting and presentation. He has put his ideas in book form; not only his ideas on stage art but also reproductions of some of the extraordinary scenery he has painted. It has just been published by E. P. Dutton & Co. and is called "Towards a New Theatre."

He dedicates the work to the Italians generally in respect, affection and gratitude to their old and new actors, ever the best in Europe. He settles some other questions quite as abruptly.

It seems, he says, that there is still very much to explain about the theatre and the art of the theatre before the other questions quite as abruptly.

The danger of pointing in a new direction, even toward a familiar object, is very great. It is even greater when the object is strange to us. Every one cries out, "Where! Where!" and is content when his eye alights upon the very first object it chances upon. The difficulty he finds is to see far enough, and then at that distance to see in perfect detail.

If I point, for instance, to a mountain a great distance from us a child sitting on the grass will look up to see the tall grasses in front of his nose, and what he hears me say about the distance he will apply to the tops of these grasses. A woman standing beside me, instead of looking in the direction to which I point, will probably look at me pointing. A man will probably look as far as he can; it is a thousand to one that his eye will be caught by something a hundred yards off, or even a thousand yards off, or it may be that a bird springing up from the bushes and floating off will catch his eye, and all interest in the mountain will be gone. It may be that he will take a castle on a hill to be a mountain; or there may be some who, looking as far as they can, searching the horizon, will finally deny that any such mountain exists.

It is a mountain that I am pointing toward, a high place; that mountain is the theatre. If it were something else I would call it something else. As yet I know of no other name for it. Let it then remain the theatre, and please believe me when I tell you it is a mountain. It is not a hill, nor a group of hills, nor any mirage of hills—it is the largest mountain I have seen. No one has yet been able to scale its heights, because there is something evidently very strange about this mountain. Had it been easily accessible it would have been climbed long ago. Now tell me, don't you consider there is something very strange about this? People have wandered about its base for thousands of years, and no one has ever gone to the top, and many there are who refuse to believe that it has a top, but as I have seen the top I wish flatly to contradict the many. I have seen the top from the distance; Fuji is not crowned more beautifully.

It is toward that mountain that I am attracted, and since I began to move in its direction I find that I have come a little nearer to it than I was when I set out twenty-five years ago.

On my journey I have come across some curious people. I have met some who went past me and back to the place whence I started, and who in passing told me they were going in the direction of that mountain. Some I met with backs turned toward it who told me they had just been there; "it wasn't very much to see after all." They had a disappointed look on their faces. Others there were who described it to me saying, "It is just six thousand and sixty-two and a half feet high; it is an extinct volcano, and the middle classes inhabit the summit. The climate is very dry; the trade in cinders is very brisk." These people have been looking at the wrong mountain. Others who profess to have come from there say that it is ruled by ladies—and the rest of their story is too ridiculous to repeat.

Now this is all very well for use as paragraphs in the press, but it isn't the truth. Nobody has scaled those heights, nobody's report concerning those heights is correct. Everybody lies about it, for everybody is talking of something else.

I don't lie about it. I don't tell you I have discovered the place. I tell you I am moving toward it. I do not tell you I am moving toward a new temple, for that would also be a lie. I am moving toward a new theatre and this book is one of my contributions toward a new theatre. All that I have put in the book now lies behind me. I found it in the level plains, not even on the rising ground, far less in the heights, and therefore you must not get too excited about the little discoveries—for now the larger and finally the great discoveries await us.

Once upon a time stage scenery was architecture. A little later it became imitation architecture; still later it became imitation artificial architecture. Then it lost its head, went quite mad, and has been in a lunatic asylum ever since. Some day, when my school comes into being, we will issue a book dealing with the historical facts of this case. I shall see to it that my scenic work receives justice (I fear that very little of it will ever see salvation), but here and now is not the time nor the place to pull it to pieces. I could do that probably more thoroughly than any of my critics do. My remarks apply to the designs (with eight exceptions) in this book. These thirty-two drawings represent work done between 1900 and 1910. That work is now part of my past, and although I can look back at it with interest I have no very great sentimental affection for my work of yesterday just because it is mine. That it is not so entirely without sense or without taste doesn't in my opinion excuse the fact that it is not quite right as stage scenery. It will not bear comparison with the noblest scenery when the conditions of the stage were noblest. At the noblest period that we know of there was little talk of "simplicity" and less talk of illusion, and the scene painter was utterly unknown. In those days they built their theatres for their dramas, not their dramas for and in their theatres. They played in the daytime and with the sun streaming upon the actors and audience alike, and didn't indulge in what is called "lighting effects." They didn't waste an enormous amount of time trying to get some false color that would look true by artificial light. Neither did they paint their faces with magenta and yellow ochre so as to look as if they had just come from the country. At Letchworth in the autumn of the year 1912 I was fortunate enough to be present at a performance practically in the open air, where artificial light was banned. England is quite an ideal country for open air and daylight performances. In the south of Europe it is uncomfortably hot; here in England it is cool, and the rain is always a natural legislator which prevents an exaggerated number of unnecessary festivals. Festivals are for the springtime; one month is enough.

But they didn't abstain from doing these things to be more natural, but only so as to be true. Now it is very difficult for the ordinary reader to understand what one means by truer, and it is really hardly necessary for him to understand so long as the stage artist understands. I never met one of them in England who could entirely understand, or if there are one or two they have never let me into the secret of their existence. I wish they would, for this sort of work gets rather lonely after a time; but to be true in art is not to lie to yourself, and that is very difficult and very expensive. But it is no waste of time nor of life; it is a form of gambling where you bet on a certainty. There is the National Gallery opposite me as I write to bear witness to the truth of the statement, and there is Nelson too. Risk your life for the arts either of peace or war, and you cannot fail to win. But there must be no limitations; you must not think that to have talked about simplicity and beauty for a season, or made a speech before the Players Club in which you went against the taste of the day before yesterday, that you have risked anything more than the contempt of angels; and I say this because I do not want you to think that I should disagree with any serious critic who would advise me to take all my designs and burn them up as being unworthy of the highest traditions of scenic art. For these designs, as I have said before, and indeed many times in one place or another, are my efforts in one division of a phase of theatrical art—a phase through which I have passed. Compare them with the scenery of the Greeks, which is, I suppose, the oldest scenery we know anything about, and you will see how they suffer by the comparison. Compare them with the second noblest scenery for drama, the scenery of the Christians, and they seem little better. Compare them with the third period, when men began to make imitation architecture for artificially lighted theatres—that is, in the sixteenth century—and they seem fairly good. I think that they would have held their own on the stage against the designs by Peruzzi, Serlio, Palladio, and the others; I think they are much better than the rococo scenery of Bibiena, and I must say that I think they triumph over in latter day scenery. The question as to just where they triumph and where they are defeated I cannot go into now nor here, but I can tell you something of the several periods of stage scenery without bothering you with many dates or names.

When drama went indoors, it died; and when drama went indoors its scenery went indoors too. You must have the sun on you to live, and drama and architecture must have the sun on them to live. Of course, you may say that "hanging on" is "living," but it is practically being dead—alive. Drama was able to be out of doors and in the sun because, instead of being a nightly amusement, it was a rare festival. People have always spoken about it as being a religious festival, but perhaps it is a mistake nowadays to underline this, because the word "religious" to us means one thing and in the old days it meant another thing. How best to describe what it was in the old days? Probably if you were to stand in St. Mark's Square—or even in Trafalgar Square, for the matter of that—on a sunny day, and see a couple of hundred pigeons wheeling around the square, flapping their wings, enjoying themselves in their own godlike way, you would get the nearest idea to what a Greek festival was like. And have you ever noticed that the people in the square passed on and took no notice of such an event? No; you will find that even the dullest man in the street will stay and watch the performance. Just such a performance is being played in front of my window as I write. Over fifty or sixty people have stopped to watch it, and that without a single advertisement having been put up. There are many people who will tell you that the Greek drama attracted because of its display of human passions, because of its beautiful girls dancing (such people always imagine that beautiful girls danced in the Greek dramas), or because of some subtle intellectual force which held the audience in its grip, and so forth. But it was nothing of the kind. It was simply that the Greeks had captured many of the scenes of nature from the girls, from the trees, from the clouds, and were not afraid to put such simple secrets to a religious use. And the chief secret they caught was a small part of the secret of movement. It was the movement of chorus which moved the onlookers. It was the movement of the sun upon the architecture which moved the audience.

A later day critic, speaking of a performance given in some open air theatre in Italy, where the architecture was the only scenery displayed, tells of the emotion created by the passage of the sun during the drama. He was unable to describe it exactly, and I think that very few people could do so either, and then only in a poem. But he spoke of how time seemed actually to be in motion. The movement was felt, but felt through seeing.

After the Greek came the Christian theatre; that is to say, the Christian Church. The theme of their drama, if no more tragic than that of the Greeks, was perhaps gloomier. For scenery, architecture again was used, and we may see what kind of stage they had by looking at photographs and drawings of the choirs and sanctuaries of all the early Christian churches. We see stages rising one above the other, the windows placed at certain angles to illumine the stages, the entrances so arranged that movements of single figures or groups are made significant. We see the seats for the musicians, we see the very place

Continued on Tenth Page.

"Enter the Army"

The Steps III.

Dido and Æneas, Act III. Scene I.